

# LANDOWNER INCENTIVE PROGRAM

The Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grant to supplement the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Initiative (PLI) towards protecting, enhancing and restoring habitats on private lands to benefit endangered, threatened, candidate, or other at risk wildlife species. The expected results and benefits of LIP is to: 1) initiate outreach, 2) contact landowners and conduct preliminary assessment of potential sites and 3) improve the status of number of at-risk species. The Department began its LIP outreach efforts by informing farmers and ranchers about LIP. Landowner meetings and open houses were held in conjunction with county Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offices.

## Projects On The Ground

The Department is currently working with a rancher in Bowman County, North Dakota to plant native grass and forbs on former cropland, which will be used for cattle grazing, but will also create beneficial nesting and brood rearing habitat for Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*). There is a large amount of unbroken native sagebrush/grasslands in this region; however the producer is concerned about the future loss of native sagebrush/grasslands in the area. As a rancher, he prefers a well managed sagebrush/grassland ecosystem rather than cropland. The cropland that is being seeded to grass is within two miles of an active Sage-Grouse lek. The number of displaying male Sage-Grouse on this lek has been somewhat steady since the 1950s, when census data was first recorded. The Department feels that it is important for the sagebrush/grasslands in the area around the lek remain intact and efforts to restore cropland to sagebrush/grasslands should be pursued.

After discussion with Department biologists and NRCS, the producer agreed to develop a grazing system for the grass planting that will benefit his cattle operation as well as Sage-grouse. (Figure 1.) The Department has entered in to a ten-year agreement with the producer. The producer is willing to work with the Department in the future on other habitat enhancement projects on this area. Future grass plantings and introduction of big sagebrush (*artemisia tridentata*) are being planned to further enhance the area for Sage-Grouse. The Department will continue to support the landowner with technical and financial assistance throughout the length of the agreement.

The Department is also working with a rancher in Bowman County, North Dakota to develop a grazing system with water developments, cross fencing and pipelines to benefit Sage-Grouse. The rancher expressed interest in the LIP after a Department Biologist held an open house at the county NRCS office. The rancher indicated that there were Sage-Grouse present on the land years ago, but increased grazing pressure, loss of native sagebrush/grasslands has resulted in diminishing populations of Sage-Grouse.

The Department met with the rancher and evaluated the land and determined that a grazing system with a series of cross fences and water development could benefit the rancher's cattle as well as provide necessary wet meadow habitat necessary for young Sage-Grouse broods. The grazing system incorporates four grazing units, in which no pasture may be grazed more than one time each year. Pastures that have been identified as having wet meadow areas, which are highly attractive to young Sage-Grouse broods and cattle, have an adjusted "put in" date to avoid disrupting these important areas during critical brood rearing times. Alternative water sources were provided to the landowner through LIP and the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).



*Figure 1. Former cropland on right side of picture will be seeded back to native grass-forb mix.*